



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL**  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

TOM HUCKER  
COUNCILMEMBER

PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE  
TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE  
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Dear friend,

From schools and roads to public safety and mass transit, Montgomery County's new \$5.4 billion budget puts its residents' current and future needs first while holding the line on taxes.

Crafting the budget, which kicked in July 1, is a months-long, laborious process that involves a lot of give and take. In the end, the County Council ends up with a spending plan that, more than any other piece of legislation, reflects the county's priorities and goals.

Today, I'm writing you with an update on the budget and how it will help our neighborhoods in eastern Montgomery County.

As in past years, during this process I evaluated each program against four priorities:

- Ensuring a **world-class education for every child;**
- Improving our **transportation system and our neighborhoods;**
- Protecting our **environment and public health;** and
- Providing a **strong safety net for our most vulnerable residents.**

**A detailed account of the budget highlights immediately follows this letter.**

On the budget, as on every issue, I rely on input from the public and I am grateful that so many of you made your voice heard by contacting my office, attending public hearings or speaking to me at community meetings.

Finally, thank you for your continued trust and confidence. It is an honor to represent and serve you on the County Council. I can't succeed without your continued guidance and support. Please don't hesitate to share your views, invite me to your community meetings or let me know if I can be helpful with any constituent services. **You can reach my office at 240-777-7960 or at [tom.hucker@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:tom.hucker@montgomerycountymd.gov). And you can reach me and receive important updates if you follow me on Twitter at @TomHucker and "Like" my Council page on Facebook.** Please stay in touch!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Hucker".

Tom Hucker

## **EDUCATION**

About half of the county's annual operating budget goes to our public schools, as it should. Our public schools are our most valuable and worthwhile investment in our future. I'm glad we were able to fully fund the Board of Education's budget request this year.

Operating one of the nation's top school systems isn't cheap. In fiscal year 2018, that means \$2.52 billion will be spent educating our roughly 160,000 students.

One major reason for the increase is growing enrollment: School officials expect the number of students to grow by 2,292, or 1.4 percent, in the 2017-18 school year. Last year, we provided enough new funding to allow the school system to hire hundreds of new instructors in order to shrink the average class size for the first time in a decade. The FY18 budget will continue this progress by funding 91 more teachers to keep pace with our growing enrollment.

### **School playing fields**

This spring, parents told the County Council that their kids need decent playing fields – and we listened. Too often the playing fields at our schools are so wet and muddy that children can't use them and get the exercise – and fun – that they want and need.

That's why the six-year Capital Improvement Plan was amended to include \$750,000 to fix up the fields at up to a half-dozen elementary schools. And that initial outlay might be only the beginning, as the pilot project – called the Outdoor Play Space Maintenance Project – could be expanded to study and restore fields at more schools throughout the county.

Plenty of exercise isn't just good for children's bodies: It's good for their brains too, according to the federal National Center for Biotechnology Information and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"There is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores," according to a 2010 CDC report. "... physical activity can have an impact on cognitive skills and attitudes and academic behavior, all of which are important components of improved academic performance."

Not only are many grass fields a mess, but sometimes portable classrooms have been placed on blacktop areas at schools, taking away even more play space from children.

Fields at four schools in our district – Takoma Park Elementary, Rolling Terrace Elementary, Sligo Creek Elementary and Flora Singer Elementary in Silver Spring – will benefit from the pilot program. Next year, I will push to expand this program to fix up more fields, including Silver Spring International Middle School's. The program would be funded as an amendment to the six-year Capital Improvement Plan adopted in 2016.

### **Head Start**

Early education is the best investment we can make in tackling the achievement gap in our schools. Research shows that 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs before age 5.

Since its launch a half-century ago, Head Start has benefited millions of preschoolers, helping improve their health, academic achievement and social skills. The fiscal 2018 budget adds \$2.2 million to expand this valuable program in the county.

The money will help expand part-day Head Start programming to full-day programs for 200 of the county's neediest children, with 10 classes of 20 children each. Among the elementary schools that might expand their programs are Montgomery Knolls, Dr. Charles Drew, Glenallan and Fairland in Silver Spring. We still need a more dramatic solution to provide universal, affordable pre-K programs, but this is a solid step forward. The budget also adds \$342,000 to provide pre-kindergarten classes through CentroNia in Takoma Park for more than three dozen 3- and 4-year-olds.

## **TRANSPORTATION & ENVIRONMENT**

The transportation sector is one of our leading sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing vehicle miles traveled through sustainable development and expanding transit are crucial priorities to address both our transportation and environmental challenges in the county. As a member of the Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee, I am very focused on improving the county's air, water and land; promoting greener public policies; investing in our infrastructure networks; and fostering smart growth and healthier and more sustainable communities.

### **US-29 corridor**

US-29 is the most clogged transportation corridor in the state. Currently, Ride-On buses are late 60 percent of the time on US-29, leaving frustrated commuters waiting – sometimes for a half-hour or more – in the rain, heat or snow.

Among the important transportation initiatives I supported in the new budget is one to begin limited-stop Ride-On Express bus service on US-29, the major commuter corridor in the East County. The new budget includes \$732,748 to add these Express buses, starting next January. These new buses will soon help get people where they want to go more quickly while the county continues to study design plans for a Bus Rapid Transit system on US-29.

Such a system could become a long-term fix, as it could get 4,000 people out of their cars every day on that corridor – but all that depends on the plans. Besides easing traffic, any new system must meet two goals: enhancing pedestrian safety and making it easier, not more difficult, for those who drive cars. I will not support a plan that fails to meet these requirements.

### **Green space**

Our county's green spaces are one of its greatest assets. Our communities receive so many benefits from these spaces, both recreationally and environmentally. That's why I fought to eliminate the proposed cuts to the Parks Department, and supported a total of \$94.8 million for Parks, including new funding to improve our fields, expand our trail systems and activate

community parks. I also successfully advocated to add \$500,000 to the budget to plant nearly 3,000 street trees in neighborhoods across the county.

### **Road resurfacing**

For years during and after the Great Recession, the county severely underfunded street repaving, allowing many neighborhood streets to deteriorate. This work has been chronically underfunded in the County Executive's proposed budget, so the Council has had to increase funds to rebuild our roads. In May 2016, I successfully advocated for an additional \$500,000 for the residential road resurfacing program. On Nov. 15, 2016, I sponsored a successful supplemental appropriation to add \$8 million more for road resurfacing to the FY17 Capital Budget for neighborhoods with some of the worst road conditions. And on March 17, 2017, I offered another successful proposal to add \$6.8 million more over the County Executive's recommendation to help shrink the residential resurfacing backlog. I will continue to fight to close this backlog for the many neighborhoods that have roads in poor condition.

## **ECONOMY**

Overall, the county's economy is in relatively good shape, with an unemployment rate of 3.2 percent in May. That was lower than the national average of 4.3 percent and the state average of 4.2 percent.

The fiscal '18 county budget has more good news: Even though the budget is increasing 2.7 percent to \$5.4 billion, the property-tax rate will drop – about 2.5 cents – to \$1.0013 per \$100 of assessed value. The council also decided to keep the income tax offset credit at \$692 per eligible household; this credit goes to lower-income homeowners. All told, property taxes will generate \$1.77 billion for the county in fiscal year 2018, roughly one-third of the budget.

### **East County Opportunity Zone**

Despite the overall positive economic news, the nation's recovery from the Great Recession hasn't reached all parts of the county – including the East County, where the unemployment rate is more than three times the county average and the household median income in some areas is less than half the county median.

The new budget will help tackle these problems head-on by appropriating \$250,000 to create an East County Opportunity Zone (ECOZ). This new program will include a job center run by WorkSource Montgomery, plus programs to help adults and youths gain job skills they need for today's workplace and connect them with employers. It will also help job-seekers pay for child-care expenses, and will offer microloan assistance for aspiring entrepreneurs.

### **Downtown Silver Spring parking**

Film buffs, bar patrons, concert goers and foodies who enjoy downtown Silver Spring nightlife – and the restaurants and retailers that count on those patrons – will still have free evening parking after I killed a new proposal to hike parking rates. Under a budget proposal

by the Department of Transportation, the county would have extended until 10 p.m. the daytime fees charged for parking downtown. Currently, parking is free after 7 p.m. The proposal was an ill-conceived idea that had been floated with no economic analysis or public input.

For one thing, extending the parking fee hours can only hurt downtown merchants at a time when brick-and-mortar retailers are already hurting due to the growth of online commerce. The county government should be supporting our vulnerable local retailers and should not give any of our residents an additional incentive to stay home and shop online. Also, the county is trying to support new, fragile, small businesses through initiatives such as microlending. Undermining this goal by creating a new disincentive to retail shopping makes no sense.

And charging for nighttime parking in downtown Silver Spring would undercut our ongoing efforts to stimulate Silver Spring's nighttime economy.

Within a year or so, we may need to infuse Silver Spring's Parking District with new funds to rebuild aging parking garages and improve our streetscapes. But any new fees should be agreed upon only after a public process that involves our retailers, restaurant owners and residents, rather than through an unannounced new fee pushed by the county's transportation department.

### **Help for Fenton Village businesses**

Merchants who have taken a hit from the construction of the Studio Plaza project in downtown Silver Spring will soon get some help. At a meeting I hosted in February, several business owners reported that road closures, lack of parking and daily blasting had cut their sales by as much as 30 percent.

I pushed to include funding in the new budget to develop a marketing plan to help these Fenton Village businesses weather the building of Studio Plaza. The loss of parking spaces, combined with heavy construction equipment and trucks in the streets, is taking its toll, merchants say.

The Council must do everything it can to make sure these affected businesses can succeed and keep their doors open in Silver Spring. So I persuaded DOT to add new parking signs to help their customers find alternative parking options. And now their top need is marketing to raise their visibility and let residents know they're open for business during construction. This budget decision will make that a reality.

## **PUBLIC SAFETY AND QUALITY OF LIFE**

### **Supervised Visitation and Exchange Center**

When parents separate or get a divorce, their children are often caught in the middle. And all too often, the domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health problems that can precipitate these splits can place the kids – and abused partners – in jeopardy. When these parents who have shared-custody arrangements exchange their children for court-scheduled

visits, those encounters can be fraught with danger, for not only one or both parents, but the kids, too.

Court Watch has reported several incidents when parents seriously hurt or killed their children during unsupervised visits. Just exchanging the children for visits at a McDonald's or other unsupervised public space can be perilous. To help prevent such tragedies, Montgomery County plans to open a Supervised Visitation and Exchange Center in Rockville in October.

The new budget calls for spending \$397,214 to open and operate the center. The county Council added \$147,219 to the County Executive's proposal so the center would be open 28, rather than 20, hours per week and to have more security, including metal detectors. Plans call for the center to open Wednesdays and Fridays from 3 to 7 p.m. and Saturdays and Sundays from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Initially, the center will be used for supervised exchanges of kids, but eventually it's projected to be a place where parents could have supervised visits, too.

### **Takoma Park Paramedic**

Currently, the Takoma Park Fire Station is one of only two fire stations in the county without a paramedic. Fortunately, the fire station has been able to transport most people needing paramedical attention to nearby Washington Adventist Hospital – about 2,700 people in 2015. With that hospital moving to White Oak in 2019, the need for a paramedic at the fire station will grow only more acute.

I have worked with Takoma Park Mayor Kate Stewart, the county's fire chief and my colleagues on the Public Safety Committee to advocate for paramedic staffing for two years. I successfully secured \$400,000 in funding for paramedic staffing in this year's budget to add five paramedics, plus \$50,000 for equipment, to provide 24/7 coverage. The paramedics will be trained in next year's recruit class and will be operational before the hospital plans to move to its new 170-bed facility in White Oak in 2019.

## **PUBLIC CAMPAIGN FINANCING**

The County Council continued its commitment to helping new candidates enter the political process by fully funding the Montgomery County Public Election Fund. To bolster the fund, the new budget adds \$5 million, bringing the fund total to \$11 million. Part of the reason for beefing up the fund is that with the county adopting term limits in 2016, there will be more candidates than in past elections, according to the fund's committee report. Under the system, the county will match small contributions – \$5 to \$150 – made to candidates by county residents. Eligible candidates cannot accept donations from political action committees, corporations, labor organizations, or state or local central party committees.